

Internet in a Sectarian Islamic Context

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The Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP) was founded in Beirut in 1982 by a group of Sunni ulama who, together with their followers, were nicknamed “al-Ahbash” (The Ethiopians) after their Ethiopian-born spiritual leader, the scholar and Sufi Shaykh Abdallah al-Harari al-Habashi. Since its inception, the AICP has been backed by the Syrian regime, which considers its strong commitment to traditional non-political Sunni principles and its insistently anti-Salafi stance as a means to counter the rise of political Islam in Lebanon. However, this radical neo-traditionalist ideology and the paranoid worldview it implies are not exclusively linked to the particular context of Lebanon but constitute a vehicle for an organization that has become transnational by establishing branches in France, Germany, the United States, Australia, and even the Ukraine.

The Lebanon-based al-Ahbash movement advocates a radical neo-traditionalist version of Sunni Islam. Although numerically modest, it has established branches in several Western countries, where it continues the campaign it started in the Middle East against the Salafi trend. The movement uses the Internet innovatively and demonstrates that the strategic use of web-based interactive communication tools does not necessarily lead to the reinforcement of a culture of dialogue; on the contrary they can also serve as a means to achieve virtual ideological hegemony.

tics of geographically isolated members. Indeed, visiting a website does not replace the master-disciple relationship, which remains an essential part of Sufism, including that of the Ahbash. Strikingly, Shaykh Abdallah is only surreptitiously referred to on the AICP’s websites since, to use Michael Gilsenan’s words,² the management of the physical absence of the founding saint—who is more than 80 years old and can only travel abroad occasionally to meet his disciples—is still carried out orally by his deputies.

The second function of the Internet for the Ahbash is to improve the global cohesion of the movement by weaving links between grass roots members of the different branches worldwide, all the more so since these branches are established in highly “connected” countries. Of course, such links are not really useful with regard to close and sizeable communities as in Lebanon or France, but they are of invaluable help for isolated individuals living in Australia or North America. It is certainly not a coincidence that the Ahbash’s website was the first in the Islamic cyberspace to provide 24-hour voice chat groups in different languages.



<http://www.talkaboutislam.com>, viewed 7 January 2005

As a global but numerically marginal network made up of small groups, often facing hostility of other Sunni communities, the Ahbash have been quick to take advantage of the Internet. The English speaking—i.e. global-oriented—official website of the AICP (www.aicp.org) is dedicated to conventional uses but is rather innovative from a technological point of view. Since the web makes religious material available worldwide at very low cost, the AICP’s website provides a wide range of exoteric and esoteric contents through written as well as audio resources, among which is a radio station broadcasting from the Beirut headquarters of the movement and daily interactive religious lessons. A look at the website’s Guest Book shows that visitors using this material to improve their Islamic knowledge are not necessarily members of the AICP and sometimes live in regions where the association is not formally present (South Asia, Turkey, Nigeria, and Mindanao). Therefore, one may conclude that the website leads to an extension of the AICP’s ideological sphere of influence. However, we need to be somewhat more cautious than Olivier Roy who asserts that, thanks to the Internet, “one directly joins the Sufi neo-brotherhood [among which is al-Ahbash]” and “one can learn the thought of the Shaykh through its discourse and no longer [have to be] in [direct] contact with him.”¹ As far as Sufism informs the content of this site, we would suggest that this kind of electronic material is basically more of a showcase for the brotherhood or an aid for the ritual-mystical prac-

Ideological spider webs

At first sight, devices such as live interactive lessons or voice chat groups seem to encourage debates within the movement, but, on the contrary, close examination reveals that these instruments are primarily used by the leadership to increase its ideological control on their followers and to attract new devotees. Similarly, if one checks the AICP’s unofficial e-forums (www.talkaboutislam.com), one discovers that they function as ideological spider webs. Nothing points to the fact that these websites, which only present themselves as being “Islamic,” are actually part of the Ahbash’s cyber network. For instance, they are not related to the official websites by any hypertext link. Therefore, the random visitor is normally unaware that he or she is exposed to a set of selected opinions through carefully controlled debates. Firstly, zealous participants frequently post chapters of books edited in Lebanon by the AICP, but without any reference to the author or the editor. Secondly, veteran members answer questions concerning *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and reprimand novices whose religious knowledge is considered “deviant.” Thirdly, a team of regulators supervise the discussions and are in charge of censoring the Ahbash who are too keen to use *takfir* (excommunication)—since such a stance is considered a mark of extremism by most of the Sunnis—but above all of eliminating most of the messages posted by participants of Salafi persuasion. Ideological hegemony is thus achieved by the creation of a neo-traditionalist virtual space in which they assess very critically the ideas of leading Islamic personalities such as Amr Khalid, Khalid al-Jundi and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. In the same way they reduce the Wahhabi doctrine to a mere “heresy” in line with the Ottoman scholarly tradition of which they consider themselves to be the inheritors.

Notes

1. Olivier Roy, *L’Islam mondialisé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 127.
2. Michael Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: an Essay in the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

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